

PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Legal Division

San Francisco, California

Date: July 17, 2002

Resolution No. L-300

RESOLUTION

RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING DISCLOSURE OF COMMISSION CONSUMER SERVICES DIVISION (UTILITIES SAFETY BRANCH) RECORDS PURSUANT TO PUBLIC RECORDS ACT REQUEST BY BETHANI TEEGARDIN, ESQ., SEEKING DISCLOSURE OF COMMISSION STAFF INVESTIGATIVE REPORTS RELATING TO THE SEPTEMBER 6, 2001 FIRE IN THE VICINITY OF YANKEE HILL IN BUTTE COUNTY, REFERRED TO AS THE "POE FIRE" (INCIDENT REPORT NO. 20010907-01).

BACKGROUND

On April 23, 2002, the Commission received a Public Records Act ("PRA") request from Bethani Teegardin, Esq., requesting copies of all investigative reports and records relating to the September 6, 2001 fire in the vicinity of Yankee Hill in Butte County, referred to as the "Poe fire." On May 22, 2002, in response to this PRA request, the Commission released copies of the electric incident reports filed by Pacific Gas and Electric Company with the Commission concerning electric incident 20010907-01, as well as several reports from the California Department of Forestry. However, Commission staff counsel also informed Ms. Teegardin that staff investigative reports were exempt from the PRA, and that therefore staff could not release such records without a formal resolution from the full Commission.

On May 30, 2002, Ms. Teegardin appealed the Commission's initial response to the full Commission, requesting a resolution pursuant to General Order 66-C, for the release of Commission investigative reports prepared as a result of this incident.

DISCUSSION

The legal test for state agency disclosure of public records is set forth in the PRA (Government Code § 6250 et seq.). The PRA is intended to provide “access to information concerning the conduct of the people’s business,” while being “mindful of the rights of individuals to privacy.” (Government Code § 6250.) PRA exemptions of certain classes of records from public disclosure must be narrowly construed to ensure maximum disclosure of government operations. (*New York Times v. Superior Court* (1990) 218 Cal.App.3d 1579, 1585.) The PRA requires that the public be given access to government records unless they are specifically exempt from disclosure, or the public interest in nondisclosure clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure. (Government Code § 6255.) The listing of a record among the specific exemptions in the PRA does not prohibit the release of the records. We have long recognized that PRA exemptions are permissive, not mandatory; “they permit nondisclosure but do not prohibit disclosure.” (*Re San Diego Gas & Electric Company (SDG&E)* (1993) 49 Cal.P.U.C.2d 241, 242, citing *Black Panther Party v. Kehoe* (1974) 42 Cal.App.3d 645, 655.) The general policy of the PRA clearly favors disclosure. Unless the public interest in confidentiality clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure, we will generally release records upon request.

Public Utilities Code Section 583 states:

No information furnished to the commission by a public utility ... except those matters specifically required to be open to public inspection by this part, shall be open to public inspection or made public except on order of the commission, or by the commission or a commissioner in the course of a hearing or proceeding. Any present or former officer or employee of the commission who divulges any such information is guilty of a misdemeanor.

Public Utilities Code Section 583 “assures that staff will not disclose information received from regulated utilities unless that disclosure is in the context of a Commission proceeding or is otherwise ordered by the Commission.” (*Re Southern California Edison Company (Edison)* [Decision (D.) 91-12-019] (1991) 42 Cal.P.U.C.2d 298, 300.) Section 583 neither creates a privilege of nondisclosure for a utility, nor designates any specific types of documents as confidential. (*Id.*, 42 Cal.P.U.C.2d at 301.) As we noted in *Edison, supra*:

The Commission has broad discretion under Section 583 to disclose information. See, for instance,

Southern California Edison Company v. Westinghouse Electric Corporation, 892 Fed. 2d 778 (1989), in which the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth District stated (at p. 783):

“On its face, Section 583 does not forbid the disclosure of any information furnished to the CPUC by utilities. Rather, the statute provides that such information will be open to the public if the commission so orders, and the commission’s authority to issue such orders is unrestricted.”

The Commission’s General Order 66-C sets forth the agency’s procedures for disclosing public records. G.O. 66-C § 1.1 states that:

“Public records” of the Public Utilities Commission, includes all items encompassed in Section 6252 of the Government Code [footnote omitted], except as otherwise excluded by this General Order, statute, or other order, decision, or rule.

G.O. 66-C § 2 lists a number of classes of public records that are not initially open to public inspection. Section 2.2(a) specifically prohibits disclosure of “records of investigations ... made by the Commission, except to the extent disclosed at a hearing or by formal Commission action.” The fact that requested records fall within one or more of the § 2 classes of records not open to public inspection acts as an initial bar to public access to the records, but does not limit the Commission’s ability to order the release of the records in appropriate circumstances. G.O. 66-C § 3.4 states:

A person wishing to review records, which are not open to public inspection, may write to the Secretary in San Francisco, indicating the records being withheld, and stating the reasons why these records should be disclosed to him. Sufficient time must be allowed for the full Commission to review this request and the applicable records.

Pursuant to the requirements of G.O. 66-C § 2.2 (a), staff routinely denies most initial requests for the release of staff records concerning investigations of accidents involving entities subject to our safety jurisdiction. In response to subsequent requests to the Commission under G.O. 66-C § 3.4, however, we have routinely released such records unless there is a showing that the public interest in confidentiality clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure. (See, e.g.,

Resolution L-240 *Re Arrequin-Maldonado* (January 22, 1993) (rehearing denied in *SDG&E, supra*); and Resolution L-278 *Re Turner* (February 18, 1999).)

Faced with an ever-increasing number of requests for such records, we have begun to refine our approach to the release of accident records. For example, in Resolution L-272 *Re San Jose Mercury News and Los Angeles Times* (December 17, 1998), we stated that:

[F]uture accident reports filed by utilities will be subject to public disclosure upon request unless it is shown that in the specific circumstances of a particular accident or related proceeding the public interest in nondisclosure clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure. Such circumstances include situations in which an accident report contains confidential personal information concerning a victim, the redaction of which is permitted by law. (Resolution L-272 at 11-12.)

Resolution L-272 also addressed the disclosure of records of accident investigations by Commission staff. We found that:

As a general rule, the public interest in the confidentiality of the records of accident investigations which have been completed by the Commission fails to clearly outweigh the public interest in disclosure, in that disclosure may assist in achieving settlement of any possible litigation resulting from the incident (*See Order Denying San Diego Gas & Electric Co. App. for Rehearing of Resolution L-240* (1993) 49 CPUC2d 241, 243), and may extend the public's knowledge of and ability to analyze and respond to accidents involving electric utility facilities. (Resolution L-272 at 20 (Finding of Fact 14).)

We also found that:

Disclosure of accident investigation records to the public while an investigation is still underway could jeopardize the safety and effectiveness of the staff of the Commission or other governmental entity conducting the investigation. The public interest in the confidentiality of Commission records concerning accident investigations that have not been completed

clearly outweighs the public interest in the disclosure of such records. (Id. (Finding of Fact 12).)

Regarding the current request for investigative records, we find no compelling reasons to withhold the requested information from the public. We conclude that the public interest in non-disclosure of the requested investigative reports does not clearly outweigh the public interest in disclosure of such records. As we noted in *SDG&E, supra*, 49 Cal.P.U.C.2d at 243, disclosure of such records may assist in achieving settlement of litigation resulting from the incident at issue.

We note that Public Utilities Code Section 315 expressly prohibits the admission of orders or recommendations of the Commission, or any accident reports filed with the Commission, “as evidence in any action for damages based on or arising out of such loss of life,” and therefore offers SCE sufficient protection from any prejudice arising from public release of the records.

In view of the above, the request of Ms. Teegardin for records concerning the September 6, 2001 fire in the vicinity of Yankee Hill in Butte County, referred to as the “Poe fire,” is granted.

The Draft Resolution of the Legal Division in this matter was mailed to the parties in interest on June 18, 2002, in accordance with Public Utilities Code Section 311(g). Comments were filed on _____, by _____.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Public Records Act request by Bethani Teegardin, Esq., seeks disclosure of Consumer Services Division, Utilities Safety Branch, records regarding the Commission’s investigation of the September 6, 2001 fire in the vicinity of Yankee Hill in Butte County, referred to as the “Poe fire.”
2. The public interest in confidentiality of the Consumer Services Division Utilities Safety Branch records regarding the Poe fire fails to clearly outweigh the public interest in disclosure.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

1. The records at issue are “public records,” as defined by Government Code Section 6252(d).

2. Public Utilities Code Section 583 and General Order 66-C prohibit disclosure of the accident records at issue in the absence of a Commission order, or disclosure in the course of a formal hearing or proceeding.
3. Neither Public Utilities Code Section 583 nor General Order 66-C creates a privilege against disclosure by the Commission.
4. The general policy of the California Public Records Act favors disclosure of public records.
5. Public records may be withheld only if they fall within a specified exemption in the Public Records Act, or if the Commission demonstrates that the public interest in confidentiality clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure.
6. Public Utilities Code Section 315 bars the admission of the orders or recommendations of the Commission, or any accident report filed with the Commission, as evidence in any action for damages arising out of the incident for which the investigation was made.
7. The public interest served by withholding the records regarding the Poe fire fails to clearly outweigh the public interest served by disclosure of the records.

ORDER

1. The request of Bethani Teegardin, Esq., for the disclosure of any Commission investigative reports concerning the Poe fire is granted.
2. The effective date of this order is today.

I certify that this Resolution was adopted by the Public Utilities Commission at its regular meeting of July 17, 2002, and that the following Commissioners approved it:

WESLEY FRANKLIN
Executive Director